“Missing”

There was a knock on the door. The inner door to our home through the cycle shop. There stood this tall, handsome dark-haired man. Not knowing who he was, I called behind me to mam Sarah. “Mam,” I shouted. “There is a man here, he looks like our brother Pat, says he knows da. Not remembering any man, like this, who seemed to know our dad well, I skunked around the door, just behind it, to hear the chat.

As dad clambered up the stairs from his work basement, his eyes lit up as he shouts, “Dan! Good

Lord man. Where have you been all this time? Last time we heard about you, locked up you were. Then you disappeared.”

Dan was the eldest of da’s family. He was ten years older than our da. There were seven children born to our grandmother Mary. Granny died in her early 40s. We never knew her. Living on a farm in Markethill, our Grandad Arthur had hard choices to make then.

Arthur had two sisters who were teachers and single. They lived in Bessbrook just outside Newry. After much thought, soul

searching, even sadness, those two women proposed to have three of the family come to live in Bessbrook.

Keeping Mary, Kate to run the household, Dan the eldest along with his brother’s Tommy, John and Frank, the farm would continue to finance the family.

Northern Ireland continued its unrest including Bloody Sunday in the 1920s. That farm of our ancestors, thrived as it was close to the border where all trading came from both sides. Not always legal.

As the family grew up, Dan went off to England to a firm called General Electrical Company to study electricals and repairs. Frank who never got over his mam’s death, went off one day. He never returned. His bicycle lay propped up by the farm’s lower field gate. The family knew he just went away. There were no real concerns for his safety. No formal investigation into that missing young man. Our family knew all this though it was rarely talked about in our presence. Especially the news about uncle Dan. Overhearing a late evening chat with my ma and da, I learned the

bones of the stories of our missing uncles and aunts.

Dan was in jail. Magilligan jail in Northern Ireland. He was sentenced to six months for the possession of wiring, ignition components, various screw drivers and plyers in a canvas bag near the border at Camlough. A mountainous terrain close to Newry. Two miles to the Republic of Ireland.

After his release he simply took off, disappeared even with no contact with his family.

Ushering his brother into the kitchen with his arm around his shoulders. I never saw dad being so joyful. The tears running down his face.

Mother rushed out to the car to invite in Dan’s wife, his three children, even the dog. All these relatives we had never met before. This was 1957. They had travelled the whole way from Athy in County Kildare.

We loved those trips to Athy. Visiting our older estranged cousins. That home was always so active with the comings and goings of Kate, Peggy and James

who all had jobs in the town. Kate was the liveliest. The glamorous girl always in a hurry. Never stopping to talk with us. But she was older by some thirteen years. We had little in common.

On one particular day we learned she was getting married. I was delighted to be asked to assist at that wedding as a flower girl. From then on we became friends. A friendship that lasted until her death many years later.

As the years rolled by, Kate and her husband Eddie moved to Gorey in County Wexford. Her mother with uncle Dan lived in

their annex of their home as they aged needing attention and care.

Gorey was close to the sea, so we as a family, Michael drove our caravan to the holiday site. We had great times with our children at the sea.

The easy access to visit the Browns. This new extended family our children loved. Kate and Eddie enjoyed our visits of those times. They had no family. “We were never blessed with children,” my fond cousin used to say.

It was a long time though, many many years before Kate talked about her father. His going away and hiding out deep in the south of Ireland when he was young.

As a family of cousins, we had an older relative who lived near Camlough. He was a politician of sorts at the time of the Irish unrest in the 1920s. Out spoken, always stating his mind on the Irish freedom stance of the many in our country. He was known to be on the fringes of the Rebellion.

Uncle Dan got recruited some how to join the IRA. His skills in

electrics were deemed useful to the ‘cause.’

Dan never was on active duty. Never had a gun or shot anyone but he joined a crew of bomb makers.

Bomb makers who were secreted in the lower basements of large wealthy homes. Homes of those who supported the ‘cause.’

In much later life long after he got married and retired from his electrical business. When living with Kate in their annex his wife had died. Kate would sit with him

in the long winter evenings talking about old times.

With tears in his eyes he spoke of his life regrets. He often remarked, “we never knew where those bombs were being activated. It was always the most hidden of secrets. Even the day after they exploded, we were never told it was our bomb that killed those people.”

Now as he was older, there was more information even books written about the devastating nature of those explosions. “Little children were killed,” he would add with tears in his eyes.

My father would talk and talk about politics with anyone who would listen. My mother would chant, “there is no flag worth dying for,” in the background. This would be during our ‘Troubles.’ ‘The Troubles,’ that lasted for over thirty years. Sometimes he would talk about his brother Dan. “I would have joined them too,” he would frequently say. Especially after Dan died. “But I was too young. I did deliver the odd message though,” he would add as our mam tutted in the background.

Kate, Eddie and I continued our friendship long into their later years. Reminiscing on the

fractured family background of our fathers', uncles' and aunts' lives. Their mother dying so young. But on the whole we did agree that those seven children of our grandparents were basically good sound people. Except for uncle Frank, the one who disappeared.

Recently learning from a distant cousin, Frank did turn up. In England he lived. Just wandering about. Taking odd jobs. Never staying in one place for long.

Eileen was contacted by 'The Salvation Army Charity,' at times when he turned up.

We never knew anything more than that. We can only hope he had some peace of mind in his later life and died a peaceful death with someone by his side.

Uncle Dan had some history too. He joined ‘The Volunteer Reserve Force Army,’ after the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Our da often said he was wrong to do that. Aunt Mary and Kate went to England. She married and had her family there.

Rose and aunty Bee became nurses in England. Tommy and John lived a few miles away in the

country, often a visitor to our home.